

SALVaging field FILMS

THE ART OF MAKING SALVAGE FILMS: And Why It Should Become A Lost Art

Salvage film-making is the art of putting thousands of bits and pieces of film together to make a coherent film. Someone, someday may walk into your office with 2,000 feet of ir-replacable, unrepeatable film shot by a half-crazed anthropologist in a far off land. They will ask, "can you make this into a film?" Your response should be to throw yourself out of no less than a third story window; you will have a better chance of surviving with body and mind in tact. If, however, you decide to make the film, there are several simple pitfalls that can be avoided.

First, I recommend you screen the film several times before making any commitment whatsoever. Most of the problems in salvage films stem from amateur cameramen. Their favorite shots are mountains, fields, farms, villages, and other wide expanses of land. The second favorite shots are of groups, clumps and crowds of people either standing in, walking through, or looking at the previously mentioned landscape. These long and medium shots make dull films for American audiences. They should be used only to give a feeling for the environment surrounding important action shown by close-ups.

The second problem created by amateur cameramen is their lack of attention to continuity. They are intent on getting the most important action on film and neglect to provide a smooth transition from one shot to the next. As a result,

the figures on the screen jump from spot to spot, jerk from position to position, and walk in the wrong direction at the wrong time. These problems are lessened if the camera-man has taken cut-aways, (shots of someone or something not part of the central action but relevant to it). Still photographs taken at the same time and place can serve this purpose, but should be screened along with the film. Unfortunately, beginning cameramen very seldom take cut-aways or enough still photographs to adequately overcome this problem.

The third major problem created by inexperience behind the camera is improper judgment of the length of shots. While looking at a shot, your eye seeks the most important spot or action. This takes a small but measurable amount of time. If you get the feeling, watching the footage, that someone is cuffing your head, making you miss the importance of each shot, the shots are all too short. This can be corrected for a few key shots, but to do so for the entire film is expensive and causes a jerky effect in the finished film.

In summary, I recommend you do not attempt to salvage fieldwork footage unless it has the following: a) a large proportion of close-ups to medium and long shots, b) steadiness (no jiggling, few zooms and pans), c) reasonable quality, not grossly over or underexposed, d) shots that hold on each subject the correct length of time, and e) a possible story line, no matter how tenuous.

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